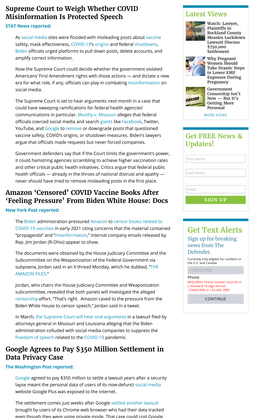
Science Vaccines

Supreme Court to Weigh Whether COVID Misinformation Is Protected Speech + More

The Defender's Big Brother NewsWatch brings you the latest headlines related to government "abuse" of power, including attacks on civil liberties and the country's power and mass surveillance. The views expressed in the excerpts from other news sources do not necessarily reflect the views of The Defender.

By The Defender Staff



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Supreme Court to Weigh Whether COVID Misinformation Is Protected Speech

STAT News reported:

As social media sites were flooded with misleading posts about vaccine safety, mask effectiveness, COVID-19's origins and federal shutdowns, Biden officials urged platforms to pull down posts, delete accounts, and amplify correct information.

Now the Supreme Court could decide whether the government violated Americans' First Amendment rights with those actions — and dictate a new era for what role, if any, officials can play in combating misinformation on social media.

The Supreme Court is set to hear arguments next month in a case that could have sweeping ramifications for federal agencies' communications in particular. Murthy v. Missouri alleges that federal officials coerced social media and search giants like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google to remove or downgrade posts that questioned vaccine safety, COVID's origins, or shutdown measures. Biden's lawyers argue that officials made requests but never forced companies.

Lower decisions delivered rays of hope that the Court limits the government's power; it could hamstring agencies scrambling to achieve higher vaccination rates and other critical public health priorities. Or it could give federal public health officials — already in the throes of national distrust and apathy — more room to push back on misinformation that could cost lives.

Amazon 'Censored' COVID Vaccine Books After 'Feeling Pressure' From Biden White House: Docs

New York Post reported:

The Biden administration pressured Amazon to censor books related to COVID-19 vaccines in early 2021 citing concerns that the material contained "propaganda" and "misinformation," internal company emails released by Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) appear to show.

The documents were obtained by the House Judiciary Committee and the Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government as subpoena, Jordan said in an X thread Monday, behind the PUBLISHED "THE AMAZON FILES."

Jordan, who chairs the House Judiciary Committee and Weaponization subcommittee, claimed the emails show the government engaged in alleged censorship effort that's "right ... Amazon caved to the pressure from the Biden White House to censor certain books," Jordan said in a tweet.

In March, the Supreme Court will hear oral arguments in a lawsuit filed by attorneys general in Missouri and Louisiana alleging that the Biden administration colluded with social media companies to suppress the freedom of speech related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Google Agrees to Pay $350 Million Settlement in Data Privacy Case

The Washington Post reported:

Google agreed to pay $350 million to settle a lawsuit years after a security lapse meant the personal data of users of its now-defunct social media website Google Plus was exposed to third parties.

The settlement comes just weeks after Google settled another lawsuit brought by users of its Chrome web browser who had their data tracked even though they were using private mode. That case could cost Google billions, though a specific amount has yet to be announced.

In 2018, Google realized that its systems had been exposing the data of millions of users of its Google Plus website to external developers for years, but executives chose not to notify the public or shareholders. An internal Google memo at the time pointed out that if the security lapse came to light, the company might be subject to the kind of scrutiny Facebook was then receiving for how its data was used by Cambridge Analytica in the 2016 election. Months later, the Wall Street Journal reported on the privacy lapses and the memo, sending the company's stock plummeting and triggering a wave of negative media reports.

In September, Google will face another trial, this one by a group of the U.S. Department of Justice, which alleges the company has broken competition laws in the digital ad market.

Biden's AI Plan to Censor You Revealed: Researchers Say Americans Can't 'Tell Fact From Fiction'

New York Post reported:

Twitter's censorship of the Hunter Biden laptop story in 2020 could soon be possible on an industrial scale — thanks to AI tools being built with funding from his father's administration, a report from Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee claimed Tuesday.

The report reveals how the Biden administration is spending millions on artificial intelligence research designed to make anti-"misinformation" tools which could then be passed to social media giants.

And it discloses how researchers who got funding for the plan — known as "Track I" — emailed each other to say that Americans could not tell fact from fiction online and that conservatives and veterans were even more susceptible than the public at large.

The report was published by the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on the Weaponization of Government, which is chaired by Jim Jordan (R-OH).

It casts new light on how funding from the National Sciences Foundation is being given to elite institutions including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Madison-Wisconsin and the University of Michigan, for a program called Trust & Authenticity in Communication Systems."

Not Wearing a Mask During COVID Health Emergency Isn't a Free Speech Right, Appeals Court Says

Associated Press reported:

A federal appeals court shot down claims Monday that New Jersey residents' refusal to wear face masks at school board meetings during the COVID-19 outbreak constituted protected speech under the First Amendment.

The 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals issued a ruling in two related cases stemming from lawsuits against officials in Freehold and Cranford, New Jersey.

The suits involved around claims that the plaintiffs were retaliated against by school boards because they refused to wear masks during public meetings. In one of the suits, the court sent the case back to a lower court for consideration. In the other, it said the plaintiff failed to show she was retaliated against.

Still, the court found that refusing to wear a mask during a public health emergency didn't amount to free speech protected by the Constitution.

The court added: "Skeptics are free to — and did — voice their opposition through multiple means but disobeying a masking requirement is not one of them. One could not, for example, refuse to pay taxes to express a belief that taxes are theft. Nor could one refuse to wear a motorcycle helmet as a symbolic protest against a state law requiring them."

Study Confirms Fears That COVID Pandemic Reduced Kindergarten Readiness

Cincinnati Children's Research Horizons reported:

Numerous studies have raised alarms about how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning, development and mental health among school-aged children. But few have focused on the effects felt by the 22 million children under age 6 who were not yet in school.

Now a study published Feb. 5, 2024, in JAMA Pediatrics, led by researchers at Cincinnati Children's in collaboration with the Cincinnati Public Schools, documents the pandemic's harmful effects on kindergarten readiness. The study looked at more than 6,000 kindergartners who took a new, state-required Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) in 2018, 2019 and 2021–including 3,200 children who received care through Cincinnati Children's primary care clinics.

What the researchers found was concerning. Only 30% (or 1 in 10) of Cincinnati Public Schools students were assessed as kindergarten-ready in 2021, a significant decline from 40% (or 4 in 10) assessed as ready in 2018. Researchers found a similar pattern in the 3,200 children who receive care through Cincinnati Children's primary care sites: 21% were deemed ready to learn in 2021 compared to 32% in 2018.

"This means that 7 of every 10 children in the Cincinnati Public Schools were considered not ready to learn when they entered kindergarten during the pandemic. This trend was even more pronounced among the more disadvantaged, Medicaid-covered children we see in our primary care clinics," says the study's lead author Kristen Copeland, MD, Division of General and Community Pediatrics.

Social Media Algorithms 'Amplifying Misogynistic Content'

The Guardian reported:

Algorithms used by social media platforms are rapidly amplifying extreme misogynistic content, which is spreading from teenagers' screens and into school playgrounds where it has become normalized, according to a new report.

Researchers said they detected a four-fold increase in the level of misogynistic content suggested by TikTok over a five-day period of monitoring, as the algorithm served more extreme videos, often focused on anger and blame directed at women.

While this particular study looked at TikTok, researchers said their findings were likely to apply to other social media platforms and called for a "digitally digital" approach to tackling the problem, rather than outright bans on phones or social media which "are likely to be ineffective".

The study, by teams at University College London and the University of Kent, comes at a time of renewed concern about the impact of social media on young people. Research last week found young men from Generation Z — many of whom receive social media influencer Andrew Tate — are more likely than baby boomers to believe that feminism has done more harm than good.

Meta Announces New Updates to Help Teens on Its Platforms Combat Sextortion

TechCrunch reported:

Meta is introducing a few new updates and efforts to help teens on its platforms combat sextortion, the company announced on Tuesday. Most notably, Meta announced the expanded availability of Take It Down, which is an online tool that it helps finance and is run by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). The company also updated its Sextortion hub with new guidance and is launching a global campaign to raise awareness about sextortion.

Take It Down is designed to prevent the spread of non-consensual intimate imagery, and is now available in 25 more languages after originally only launching in English and Spanish last year. It allows teens to take back control of their personal intimate photos and prevents ex-partners and scammers from spreading them online.

The system can be used by people under 18 who are worried their content has been or may be posted online. It can be used by parents or trusted adults on behalf of a young person. Plus, it can be used by adults who are concerned about images taken of them when they are under 18.

Meta Will Label AI-Generated Content From OpenAI and Google on Facebook, Instagram

Ars Technica reported:

On Tuesday, Meta announced its plan to start labeling AI-generated images from other companies like OpenAI and Google, as reported by Reuters. The move aims to enhance transparency on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Threads by informing users when the content they see is digitally synthesized media rather than an authentic photo or video.

Coming during a U.S. election year that is expected to be contentious, Meta's decision is part of a larger effort within the tech industry to establish standards for labeling content created using generative AI models, which are capable of producing fake but realistic audio, images, and video from written prompts. (Even non-AI generated fake content can potentially confuse social media users, as we covered yesterday.)

Meta says the technology for labeling AI-generated content labels will rely on invisible watermarks and metadata embedded in files. The company has a small "Imagined with AI" watermark in images created with its public AI image generator.

However, Meta President of Global Affairs Nick Clegg mentioned that there's currently no effective way to label AI-generated text, suggesting that it's too late for such measures to be implemented for written content. This is in line with our reporting that AI detectors for text don't work.

Government Hackers Targeted iPhone Owners With Zero Days, Google Says

TechCrunch reported:

Government hackers last year exploited three unknown vulnerabilities in Apple's iPhone operating system to target victims with spyware developed by a European startup, according to Google.

Google's Threat Intelligence Group, the company's team that investigates nation-backed hacking, published a report analyzing several government campaigns conducted with hacking tools developed by several spyware and exploit sellers, including Bandook-based startup Variston.

In one of the campaigns, according to Google, government hackers took advantage of three iPhone "zero-days," which are vulnerabilities not known to Apple at the time they were exploited.

In this case, the hacking tools were developed by Variston, a surveillance and hacking technology startup whose malware has already been analyzed twice by Google in 2022 and 2023.

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CindyCervenak
5 days ago
Something oppressive is beginning to achieve higher vaccination rates... In other words, according to hoodwink each individual into doing what they want you to do medically, regardless of whether it hurts your individual health or not. That is a totalitarian mindset. It is outrageous, and they are so married to the cult of vaccines that they don't see that the vaccines are causing the harm.
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5 days ago
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Peter van der Sluis
5 days ago
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